BOOK REVIEWS

Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 423,

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by Syaza Farhana Mohamad Shukri, *International Islamic University Malaysia*

The book argues against the prevalent theory of modernisation and democratisation that the separation between state and religion should be the natural outcome of a modernising Islamic society, similar to the historical trajectory of the West as a liberal political system. Instead, the author shows through her meticulous work in the Middle East that to the contrary, Islam is further politicised in the region following the formation of nation-states because there is a lack of demarcation between Islam and the nation as an identity. The main tenet of the book is that “[t]he use of Western secular techniques in law and constitutions created a strong connection between Islam and politics and contributed to the redefinition of Islam as a *political norm* in ways unknown under the Muslim empires.” (p. 7) It is this conflation between the religious and political self of Muslims in the early twentieth century that makes it difficult for state institutions to ignore the people’s natural desire for a religious life and therefore political system. Although this conversation is far from new, the author’s argument is meant to rattle the prevalent discourse so that we can find a way forward for democratic Muslims without having to undermine their experience or reality.

Since the book covers various countries from Iraq to Turkey, it is filled with important information that is beneficial to readers who are not familiar with the background of the region. The book is divided into three main parts that also correspond to the chronological order of events: the making of Islam as a modern religion, Islamism as the preeminent political force pre— and post—Arab Spring, and the disjunction of democracy and secularism—lessons learned from the Arab Spring. This structure allows readers to have a better understanding of how Political Islam became what it is today and its evolution from the periphery toward the centre. Although a reader can easily get lost in the wealth of information on the many Middle Eastern countries one finds in this book, the author’s choice of structure and style of writing makes it much easier to comprehend the main argument of a modern Islam that is different from modern Christianity as a result of state-formation preceding that of nation-building during modern Islam’s recent development.

Part II of the book concerning Islamism is more relevant today as it discusses the rise and fall of the unique subset of political actors in relation to the events of the Arab Spring and its aftermath. Specifically, now that Political Islam is in the forefront of democratisation in the Middle East, there is a need to understand better where and how it will lead a country or community to a new reality. From the author's observation, she concludes that the ability of Islamists to capture the support of the people does not directly depend on its Islamic platform but on the subversion of the authoritarian state system and the ability of the Islamists to reach across multiple groups in society. In other words, Islamists in the Middle East are no different from the opposition in the Communist states during the Soviet era—their success or failure depends heavily on the political environment before the fall of the regime and the alliance built thereafter. However, the author argues that it is inaccurate to read too much into the recent decline of Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Ennahda in Tunisia to mean the end of Political Islam. As the main argument of the book goes, as long as Islam is aligned with the conservative tendencies of society, Islamism will not go away that easily.

Another interesting point made by the author is on the role played by Islam in furthering the democratisation effort in these Middle Eastern countries. Specifically, in the chapter "The Rise of Unsecular Democracies", the author makes an argument for the use of nondemocratic methods by the state to impose an institutionalised Islam to the people in order for these countries to see a more democratic future. Since Muslims are very passionate regarding the role of Islam in the running of the state, it would be unreasonable to expect the state to limit its involvement in maintaining the rights and liberties of people from different faiths. On the other hand, such effort is crucial to allow for democratisation to happen even without full liberties to minorities. This is what is meant by unsecular politics. The author's ability to illustrate clearly the practicality of such exercise, even in Western countries such as the United States of America, provides an optimistic analysis to readers who are concerned with the current state in the Middle East.

Cesari's main contribution to the literature is that there is an urgent need for Muslims to dismantle their religious identity from their national identity in order for Islam to modernise, a project that is not happening in the near future. The book calls into question the prevailing idea that for Islamic countries in the Middle East to democratise it is required for the state to avoid getting involved in religion and to allow the privatisation of religion. It is undeniable that her observation is meant to challenge those who, in no uncertain terms, stressed that the role of the state is to keep Islam away from the public sphere of discourse. In other words, the author argues for a greater role of the state. However enlightening this

argument is, it does not go far enough as there is no denying that the political actors involved are huge components in the modernisation project in Islamic countries as Islam and politics are one of the same to a majority of conservative Muslims in the Middle East.

The book is commendable for its breadth and depth, a testament to the author's capability as one of the leading analysts on the Middle East. However, there are times when the reader feels like the book is pulling itself thin by trying to cover so much without a clear indication as to where it is going. For example, there are many references made to Turkey and Pakistan in discussing Part II of the book when discussing the Arab Spring, which seems odd when these countries were not directly embroiled in the revolution. This is, of course, a minor shortcoming of the book when compared to its larger contribution to the rethinking of Political Islam and its future as a viable option in countries that seek to have greater freedom and democracy. For this, the book is worth reading especially by specialists in the area who are looking for a fresh lens to view the current situation in the region.